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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 000858

SIPDIS

STATE FOR H AND CODEL BALLINGER
STATE FOR PM, INL/LP, DRL/MLA, DRL/IL, AND EB
STATE FOR WHA/CCA, WHA/EPSC, WHA/PPC, AND WHA/CEN
STATE PASS AID FOR LAC/CEN
STATE PASS USTR
DOL FOR ILAB

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TAGS: PREL OREP ETRD SNAR PGOV PHUM EAGR CU HO
SUBJECT: CODEL BALLINGER DISCUSSES CUBA, IRAQ, CAFTA,
NARCOTRAFFICKING, AND U.S. ASSISTANCE WITH PRES. MADURO

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 782
1B. TEGUCIGALPA 751

Classified By: Ambassador Larry L. Palmer;
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On April 12, CODEL Ballenger met with Honduran President Ricardo Maduro. Issues discussed at the meeting included Cuba, Iraq, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), narcotrafficking, and humanitarian/development assistance. Representative Ballenger expressed U.S. gratitude for the Government of Honduras' (GOH) steadfast support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the leadership the GOH has demonstrated in introducing a UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) resolution on Cuba, and Honduran efforts to interdict narcotics bound for U.S. markets. Rep. Ballenger assured Maduro, who has been under intense political pressure for the GOH's positions on these issues, that Honduras' support has been noted in Washington. Rep. Ballenger also told Maduro that he would lead an effort in the U.S. Congress to win ratification of CAFTA this year. Ambassador, Deputy Chief of Mission, USAID Director, HIRC/WHEM staff officer, and PolMilOff also attended the meeting. End Summary.

Cuba

¶2. (C) Rep. Ballenger thanked President Maduro for introducing a UNCHR resolution on Cuba, noting that the U.S. stands ready to assist the GOH in support of the resolution. Maduro acknowledged that the GOH's position on human rights in Cuba was unpopular among some "left-leaning" elements in Honduran society, but he said it was a principled decision based on Honduras' unwavering support for democracy and freedom of expression. Maduro noted, however, that Honduras' relationship with Cuba remains delicate. The presence of Cuban doctors in Honduras, Honduran medical students in Cuba, the relatively recent restoration of diplomatic relations, and the GOH's effort to sign a maritime boundary with the Government of Cuba (GOC) all complicate the GOH's efforts to take a tough stand on Cuba. Maduro assured Rep. Ballenger, however, that the GOH would not back down on supporting human rights and democracy in Cuba. (Note: After the GOH introduced the UNCHR resolution, the GOC announced a suspension of the maritime boundary negotiations, which were reportedly near completion. End Note)

¶3. (C) Ambassador informed Maduro that Embassy information indicates the GOC intends to launch a smear campaign against the GOH's UNCHR resolution, to include personal attacks against Maduro. Maduro stated that he remains deeply concerned/suspicious about Cuba's presence in Honduras and the GOC's agenda here. He reiterated that restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba was a "gift" inherited from his predecessor, and not to his liking. He also indicated that he would seek to limit the number of Cuban doctors in Honduras in the future. Maduro did acknowledge that the GOH could have prepared better for the public relations and political campaign necessary to win the Honduran public's support for the resolution. In response to an inquiry from Maduro, Ambassador indicated the U.S. is prepared to provide speakers and other assistance, if requested, in support of the GOH's stand on human rights in Cuba.

Iraq

¶4. (C) Rep. Ballenger thanked Maduro for the GOH's commitment to OIF and strong support of the Coalition's goals, in spite of continued violence in Iraq. Rep. Ballenger told Maduro the U.S. recognizes the difficulties Maduro faces in sustaining Task Force Xatruch in Iraq and that we are grateful for Honduras' support. Maduro again reiterated that Honduras' presence in Iraq is based on principle, apart from supporting its most important ally. Maduro did not, however,

respond directly to Rep. Ballenger when the Chairman noted that the GOH has stated that it will recall its troops from Iraq at the end of its one-year commitment this July. (Comment: Per ref A, Embassy believes the GOH remains open to continuing a Honduran presence in Iraq, although it may require a concerted U.S. effort to convince Maduro and his party's congressional leadership to keep Honduran troops there. Minister of Defense Federico Breve, who has been a key supporter of the deployment, has been somewhat jolted by the recent violence in Najaf where the Honduran task force is stationed. He, and other National Party members, fear potential Honduran casualties and the negative political repercussions that would certainly follow. Nonetheless, Maduro's oft-repeated comments about supporting OIF as a matter of principle help keep alive the possibility of extending Honduras' presence. End Comment.)

CAFTA

15. (SBU) Rep. Ballenger told Maduro that he stands ready to push for CAFTA ratification in the U.S. Congress, while also commending the GOH for moving ahead with the agreement. He indicated that if Honduras and the other Central American participants were able to pass CAFTA in their respective legislatures, it would make it easier for him to push for passage of the agreement in Congress in November. Maduro thanked Ballenger for his support and stated that he is "positive" that the Honduran National Congress will pass CAFTA. Maduro said that the Central American participants will probably introduce CAFTA legislation in their legislatures on the same day in a display of Central American solidarity. He also offered to travel to Washington with the other Central American presidents to lobby for CAFTA support.

Narcotrafficking

16. (C) Rep. Ballenger congratulated Honduras for its recent successes in interdicting illicit narcotics en route to U.S. markets (ref B). Maduro stated that combating drug trafficking remains one of the region's top priorities. Maduro once more raised his concern over narco-corruption in the Honduran political and economic system, commenting that Honduran political and economic institutions remain relatively weak and vulnerable. He also referred to the existing "no shoot-down" policies for intruding drug-trafficking aircraft. Maduro claimed that Honduras' current policy of making contact with intruding aircraft and then "handing" them off to neighbors was both counterintuitive and not cost effective. Rep. Ballenger acknowledged the limitations placed on Honduras by U.S. information sharing policy and told Maduro he would look for ways to further assist the GOH financially for their efforts.

Economic and Development Assistance

17. (SBU) Rep. Ballenger told Maduro that the U.S. will be rejoining the International Coffee Organization (ICO) and noted that he hopes for a stabilization of world coffee prices that will deliver a "fair" price for quality coffee producers. Rep. Ballenger raised the prospect that Honduras could possibly qualify for the first round of aid recipients under the new Millennium Challenge Account. Maduro said he hoped Honduras would be among the first recipients and that the aid would be very useful in his efforts to sustain economic growth, reduce poverty, and lower chronic unemployment. Rep. Ballenger also informed Maduro of his assistance with building schools in rural northern Honduras and in donating used school equipment to needy Honduran communities.

PALMER